My Christmas Gift to Man

By Daniel A. Lord, S.J.

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IT is Christmas Eve. What more natural, then, than that I should be thinking of you?

Christmas is kind to us, isn't it? As the blessed day draws near, it seems to hurry forward on a very rush of memories, and we find ourselves surrounded by the dear friends who have held out firm hands through the year, who have walked bravely with us along noonday paths and stood with us while stars in clusters hung just out of reach of our aspiring fingertips.

Perhaps they are a slightly shadowy host, these friends who

return with the return of Christmas, but their shadows are real and vital and vigorous and as dear and welcome as in life.

Christmas brings dear friends back to us, and we see them smiling out of the golden aura that is never lighted save by the golden flame of a Christmas candle.

SO you are here with me tonight, coming in the precious company of those dear friends who have sung into my life its richest harmonies, strung it with long lines of stars, and crammed it full of memories, jewel-like yet unlike the fairest jewels, for these are alive, not alone with light, but with a mellow, healing warmth.

And since I cannot come to welcome you with empty hands,

I fumble about, seeking the Christmas gift my friendship approves, my circumstances make possible.

ISN'T it sad that we cannot at times like these give as our hearts dictate and the spirit of the season rightly demands? For today and with the dawn of tomorrow all humanity seems one great throbbing heart beating to an unaccustomed rhythm of generosity. Quickly and readily our own hearts take up the tempo of its unselfish beat. Of a sudden, we long to give.

Each package borne in triumph under a jaunty arm, each sound of crinkling paper snapping like ice on a brilliantly cold morning, is fresh challenge to our selfless giving. Our eyes search tempting shop windows, searching for the

first time, not for what we may claim for ourselves, but for what we may with lavish gesture give away. Our fingers dance with an eagerness to slip gifts into each chimney corner of our suddenly glowing world.

NO rich fruit of nature's lavish harvest, no precious stone tortured from the black darkness of the earth, no fair achievement of art or craft or letters, but we stroke it with appraising glances, measuring it, not by our ability to purchase, but by the fitness of the object to serve as symbol of our expanding generosity.

I WALKED today where Christmas shouted to me in silent emphasis, calling upon me to join mankind in its glorious moment of

self-forgetfulness. Under my eyes I seemed to see human indifference warm to friendship, friendship ripen to affection, affection blossom into love with love's glorious selflessness.

HOW generous, I thought, Christmas makes us all, and how kind! For this single season the horrid greed of our race is by sweet magic transmuted into a flame of spendthriftiness.

Each stall or counter wooes us to unselfishness, and for once we yield readily to the wooing. Trucks piled till their springs are sagging would, we feel, still be weak symbols of our love. In imagination we choke yawning vans with the gifts we wish for our friends and then reject them as still too, too inadequate.

YET, good friend and true, as I smile at you through the golden mist that is the aureola of Christmas, I find myself reaching out a hand apparently giftless. No ring have I to place in a blaze of white light upon your finger, no favorite book to companion you through a winter's evening, no craftily wrapped gift to pique your fancy and reward your eager searching.

Giftless I come unless I can make you see that I am not so giftless as I seem. There are, dear friend, the more precious things that cannot be wrapped in red ribbons nor festooned with clustering berries and bright, lacquered leaves. Can the most skillful hand pack the really lovely things of life in red and crimson paper? Can any of us securely stow them

in japanned boxes or upon cushions of crushed satin?

DIAMONDS may rest snugly in tiny boxes; love is too large for the earth itself to hold. One may wrap in neat, measured package candy or ivory or the ebony plaque; into what package could one hope to cram one's calm, beautiful, yet fragile affection for a friend?

So, though to all appearances I come giftless, trustingly will you stretch your hand to me across the near distance of this Christmas Eve? I shall clasp it tight in mine and with that gesture lay within your palm and, if you'll let me, within your secret soul, my friendship.

We could drink to that friendship in great goblets of Christmas

wassail. We could dedicate it before a blazing yule log to the sound of a chanted Noël. We could ourselves symbolize it as our blended voices melted into the music of some dear, fragrant Christmas carol.

ALL that we do not need. My friendship is yours. The gift of my friendship, if you will consider it a gift, I renew this blessed eve, making it part of that symphony which, unsung and unsingable, is yet orchestrated in the souls of united families, the vibrated affections of reassembled comrades, the throbbing of glad surprise as men look upon friends to discover them to be brothers.

Nor is this my only gift. Soon I shall be going out to kneel at the Christmas Mass.

Christmas for me, dear friend (and the same is gaily true for you) is not the mere rehearsal of an ancient and beloved tale. Nor is it just the anniversary of cherished history, dear but hopelessly dead.

CHRISTMAS for us is a sweetly repeated reality. Christ's Mass is the heart of our Christmas. The dear Christ who came to earth as if down the beams of the guiding star, comes again in the sheer descent of the Consecration. Once more is He the Light of the World. Once more to Him come stumbling and hurrying, disguised perhaps in modern garb and giving some new address in city and countryside, the shepherds and the magi, who find Him wherever He may be. And calling me to join them, they kneel as the uplifted Host

proclaims, as once a star proclaimed, that God has come to earth for love of once loveless men.

May I say that, as I kneel at Bethlehem reborn, I shall give you the poor gift of my prayers? Those are gifts I can give, and gladly shall.

FOR what could I of myself give to match the gifts He gives who bends an omnipotent ear to our compelling prayers? He comes with lavish hands as once He came in a hillside cave. Those hands tremble less with cold or an infant's weakness than with eagerness to rain stars and graces on all the world. The touch of prayer is laid upon them; they part, and gifts beyond all human reckoning tumble upon our uplifted heads and hearts.

I shall pray, then, for you, good friend. I shall beg Him who is the Giver of all good gifts to enrich you as I could never do had I the wealth of all the nations at my command. If my prayer can bring you more of Christmas peace and joy, the Prince of Peace and the Source of all our joy will hear me whisper your name.

IF He will answer my requests for you, then you will know more intimately His Christmas gifts: a firmer faith in the God who in the Christmas chill came questing for us who had gone astray; a deeper hope that He who stretched imploring hands from the manger will never desert us nor let us go; a love that flamelike leaps to heaven and then, with light and warmth that touch only

to comfort, spreads out to all mankind.

Into His infant hands I shall slip your dear ones, trustingly. Into His ear I shall whisper your name, tenderly. Into His heart I shall place you yourself, for there in that burning heart is the very center of the Christmastide.

NOR, giftless though I seem, are my gifts completed. Astoundingly God came to men at the hands of fellow men. The shepherds and the magi found God-made-man held aloft to their adoration by the strong young arms of Mary, our first ostensorium.

Shepherds carried Him back in the glad tidings they brought with them to their fellow watchmen upon the hillsides. Magi carried

Him over the deserts to a pagan world weary of stone idols and of gods grown old and decayed.

Within my blessed power it is to give you, my friend, across the golden glow of Christmas Eve, your Christ and mine. And from your believing soul I can welcome Him back again.

The world about us, too large a part of it, will celebrate Christmas inanely. For men will cry aloud, "Merry Christmas!" "Happy Christmas!" and forget both Christ and His Mass.

But we shall not; not you and I, who remember Him and love Him.

FOR my best Christmas gift I give you Christ the Savior. From my heart to yours, I give you Christ the Infant King.

Merry Christmas, dear friend. With that beloved phrase born in an age of faith, I offer you that Gift of Gifts which is the Incarnate God come into your life and mine out of an incredible love and an incomprehensible lowliness.

May your day be merry because He is the laughing Babe who is its core, its source of flowing love, its center of light.

I give you Christ of the Christmastide for your home. May your home blaze with love and be warm with heavenly fire because He, its most welcome guest, rests among you while the undying star shines over your rooftree.

MERRY CHRISTMAS, dear friend. Christ in your heart; Christ in your home; Christ the center of your Yuletide joy; Christ

the reason for your hope; Christ the cause of your happiness; Christ laughing gaily in your laughter; Christ enriching your generosity; Christ ennobling and sanctifying your love.

The bells of the midnight Mass are chiming. They fall like great drops of holy sound flung upon our thirsty souls from the Babe who is our Priest. They wake us to new faith, fresh hope, unselfish love. For, even though there be miles between, I feel we can rise from our reverie here in the golden glow of Christmas Eve and together walk the short way to a new Bethlehem, where there wait gifts beyond counting in the outstretched arms of Him who is the Gift of God's eternal love.

Shall we walk that way together?

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